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# Understanding the Success of Mass Civic Protest in Tunisia

Michele Penner Angrist

*On the surface, the 2011 Tunisian Revolution seems attributable primarily to economic causes, social media, and the army's refusal to back the regime of President Zine El-'Abidine Ben 'Ali. A deeper look reveals that its success depended on the interaction between the structural brittleness of a regime that had alienated many key civilian constituencies and the emergence of sustained, cross-class, geographically widespread, mass demonstrations. These demonstrations were facilitated by Islamist moderation, secularist-Islamist rapprochement within the opposition, and the actions of the Tunisian General Union of Labor (Union Générale Tunisienne du Travail, or UGTT). In the wake of Ben 'Ali's departure, Islamist moderation and the fruits of secularist-Islamist rapprochement facilitated the holding of elections and the drafting of a new constitution.*

## UNDERSTANDING THE TUNISIAN REVOLUTION: THE COVER STORY

**P**resident Zine El-'Abidine Ben 'Ali attempted to legitimize his autocratic rule largely through rational stewardship of the Tunisian economy that would lead to general prosperity,<sup>1</sup> but he did not succeed. There were encouraging signs in the 1990s as Ben 'Ali seemed to prepare Tunisia to enter into and prosper within the global economy. Tunisia received external funding to implement financial sector reform, privatize state sector firms, and improve the competitiveness of businesses oriented toward the domestic market. At the end of the decade, however, it appeared Ben 'Ali had achieved superficial rather than fundamental economic reform. Major banks remained under state control, Tunisia's small and nontransparent stock exchange had failed to attract substantial foreign portfolio investment, foreign investment in manufacturing was similarly disappointing, and public sector firms remained a prominent (and revenue-draining) component of the economy.<sup>2</sup> Additionally, Ben 'Ali himself became more rapacious than rational: members of his and his wife's families dominated the commercial elite<sup>3</sup> as they

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1. Maria Cristina Paciello, "Tunisia: Changes and Challenges of a Political Transition," MEDPRO Technical Report No. 3 (May 2011), [http://www.iai.it/pdf/mediterraneo/MedPro/MedPro-technical-paper\\_03.pdf](http://www.iai.it/pdf/mediterraneo/MedPro/MedPro-technical-paper_03.pdf), p. 4.

2. Clement M. Henry and Robert Springborg, *Globalization and the Politics of Development in the Middle East* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 164–66.

3. For more details, see, Lisa Anderson, "Demystifying the Arab Spring: Parsing the Differences Between Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 90, No. 3 (May/June 2011), pp. 2–7; and Peter J. Schraeder and Hamadi Redissi, "Ben Ali's Fall," *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 22, No. 3 (July 2011), pp. 5–19.

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benefitted disproportionately from the privatization of state assets,<sup>4</sup> and preyed on others' successful businesses, thereby stifling new investment and job creation.<sup>5</sup>

The consequences for nonelite Tunisians were palpable. The gradual dismantling of import tariffs during and after the 1990s, necessitated by free trade agreements with the European Union, hurt Tunisia's textile industry.<sup>6</sup> Disappointing economic performance meant that unemployment grew — especially among university-educated youth, an estimated 40–45% of whom could not find work.<sup>7</sup> The existing economic progress and prosperity was not regionally balanced: coastal regions benefitted at the expense of the country's interior and southern regions.<sup>8</sup> In the mid-1980s, privatization of state and communal lands widened rich-poor gaps in rural areas.<sup>9</sup> In the meantime, the global economic crisis of 2008 led to rising food costs for Tunisians at the same time that remittances from abroad were declining.<sup>10</sup>

With these economic conditions as the fuel, Muhammad Bouazizi's attempted self-immolation in Sidi Bouzid on December 17, 2010, was the spark that changed Tunisian sentiment toward deep socioeconomic grievances from apparent passive resignation to indignation and political activism. Social networking media then facilitated broad mobilization<sup>11</sup> that outpaced the capacity of the internal security services to repress it. Social media were particularly pivotal in Tunisia due to the country's high rate of Internet usage: at the time of the revolt, one-third of the population used the Internet — among the highest usage rates in Africa.<sup>12</sup> When the army refused to back Ben 'Ali, the game was up.

These elements were important to the unfolding of the 2011 Tunisian Revolution, but they do not account for the entire story. Many Middle Eastern societies faced greater economic hardship than Tunisia. Despite its economic challenges outlined above, Tunisia could boast a relatively low poverty rate, high literacy rates, impressive school enrollment rates for both sexes, high life expectancy, decent health care provision, and

4. Stephen J. King, *The New Authoritarianism in the Middle East and North Africa* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2009), pp. 179–80.

5. Jack A. Goldstone, "Understanding the Revolutions of 2011: Weakness and Resilience in Middle Eastern Autocracies," *Foreign Affairs* Vol. 90, No. 3, (May/June 2011), p. 11.

6. Henry and Springborg, *Globalization and the Politics of Development*, pp. 164–66.

7. Schraeder and Redissi, "Ben Ali's Fall," pp. 7–8.

8. International Crisis Group (ICG), "*Soulèvements Populaires en Afrique du Nord et au Moyen-Orient (IV): La Voie Tunisienne*" ["Popular Uprisings in North Africa and the Middle East (IV): The Tunisian Way"] *Rapport Moyen-Orient/Afrique du Nord* [Middle East/North Africa Report] No. 106, April 28, 2011, <http://www.crisisgroup.org/~media/Files/Middle%20East%20North%20Africa/North%20Africa/106%20Soulevements%20populaires%20en%20Afrique%20du%20Nord%20et%20au%20Moyen-Orient%20-IV-%20La%20voie%20Tunisienne.pdf>, pp. 2–3.

9. King, *The New Authoritarianism in the Middle East and North Africa*, p. 181.

10. Schraeder and Redissi, "Ben Ali's Fall," p. 8.

11. On social media's role, see, Schraeder and Redissi, "Ben Ali's Fall," pp. 11–12; as well as Philip N. Howard and Muzammil M. Hussain, "The Role of the Digital Media," *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 22, No. 3 (July 2011), pp. 35–48.

12. According to the most recent global Internet usage data prior to Tunisia's 2010–11 revolution, the number of Internet users in Tunisia (3.5 million) accounted for just over one-third of the country's population — trailing Morocco as the country in Africa with the highest Internet usage rate (38%). Source: Central Intelligence Agency, *The World Factbook 2009*, available at <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/download/download-2009>.

a large middle class for the region.<sup>13</sup> From this perspective the country seemed not at all ripe for revolution. From a different perspective, the fact that the Tunisian population was relatively prosperous with a high Internet usage rate likely indicated that the country had rising expectations of its regime with regard to both economic prosperity and political participation which were not being met. Still, grievances related to unmet expectations do not automatically translate into the collective action necessary to oust a dictator. Establishing the causal story is important because many of the factors that contributed to Ben 'Ali's ouster in January 2011 also impacted Tunisia's subsequent transitional period, from the holding of elections in October 2011 to the struggle of drafting a new constitution in 2012 and 2013.

### *RECIPE FOR REVOLT*

In order for a popular movement to oust an incumbent regime, an interaction between two phenomena must unfold. First, masses of citizens from socioeconomic classes and political divisions must sustain physical protests across most of a state's territory for a significant period of time. From December 2010 to January 2011, Tunisians accomplished this. Narrower protests, either in terms of the percentage of population or geographical space involved, are too easy for authoritarian regimes to repress. In the Tunisian case, however, protestors included high school and university students and other youth under the age of 30; along with women, members of Tunisia's labor federation, lawyers, and businessmen. In Schraeder and Redissi's words, "while religious Muslims could certainly be found among the demonstrators, the larger scene was . . . notable for its diversity of faces: secular folk as well as the old and young, men and women, urbanites and rural dwellers, and professionals along with blue-collar workers."<sup>14</sup>

Social media's role undoubtedly explains part of this diversity of participation. Using social media radicalized, mobilized; and coordinated Tunisians' sensibilities and actions, which helped Tunisians overcome isolation and fear. But, social media cannot alone dictate fundamental political instincts and preferences. This article will argue that three other elements were key in facilitating sustained, cross-class, territory-wide protests. First, in the 2000s, Tunisia's secular opposition actors concluded that President Ben 'Ali was a bigger threat to their interests than were the potential consequences of allowing Tunisian Islamists to hold or share power in a post-Ben 'Ali environment. This development was facilitated by apparent Islamist moderation concurrent with the unrelenting intensification of Ben 'Ali's dictatorship.<sup>15</sup> Second, political dialogue and bridge-building between secularists and Islamists within Tunisia's opposition community during the 2000s laid the foundation for collaboration during (and after) the revolution. Finally, the Tunisian General Union of Labor

13. Stephen J. King, "Remarks on the Socio-Economic Causes of the Uprising" (speech, Maghreb Center "The Breakdown of Autocracy in Tunisia" conference, Washington, DC, February 9, 2011), <http://maghrebcenter.files.wordpress.com/2011/07/maghreb-center-tunisia-conf-transcript.pdf>.

14. Schraeder and Redissi, "Ben Ali's Fall," p. 13.

15. For the purposes of this article, "moderation" refers to Islamists no longer demanding a monopoly of power and the imposition of strict shari'a law but, rather, presenting themselves as open to power-sharing and democracy. It also refers to Islamists leaving aside violence as a means to achieving their political goals.

(*al-Ittihad al-'Amm al-Tunisi li-l-Shughl*, or *Union Générale Tunisienne du Travail*, hereafter UGTT), Tunisia's venerable national labor federation, played a key role in initiating the protests and assuring that they would spread nationwide.

The second phenomenon that must unfold for a revolution to succeed is that, in the face of broad and sustained mass civic protest, the architecture of the authoritarian regime must fail to counter, respond, and repress. The army's refusal to stand with Ben 'Ali is the most dramatic element here, and was also influential in the course of subsequent events. Moreover, to a significant extent, Ben 'Ali's fall was precipitated by the refusal of *civilians* to stand with and for the status quo by not demonstrating, or by counterdemonstrating in support of the regime. This refusal was a product of the ways in which the domestic and external support bases of the Ben 'Ali regime had narrowed over the course of the late 1990s and 2000s, leaving the president's hold on power tenuous.

### THE NARROWING OF THE REGIME

Tunisia's army refused orders to repress protesters in mid-January 2011. In many ways this was not a surprise. The army had long been regarded as professional in nature, loyal to the republic rather than to a specific ruler, and not prone to interfering in politics.<sup>16</sup> Since independence, both the army and its budget remained modest in size, and the army never experienced combat. Ben 'Ali did not rely upon the army either to seize or maintain power;<sup>17</sup> he purposely marginalized the army to ensure that it would not develop political aspirations.<sup>18</sup> Instead, Ben 'Ali relied on his domestic security apparatus — the police, the national guard, and especially the presidential guard — for crucial political support. Numbering between 130,000 and 150,000 altogether, these institutions dwarfed the 35,000-man army, perhaps only 15,000–18,000 of whom could be mobilized as soldiers (the rest were administrators).<sup>19</sup>

General Rachid 'Ammar's refusal to help Ben 'Ali in his time of need was momentous in the unfolding of the revolution. It appears to have been a decisive factor in the president's departure from the country.<sup>20</sup> The fact that the army deployed in the streets to counter Ben 'Ali loyalists who sought to sow panic no doubt bolstered Tunisian protestors' morale and determination. Yet we should not overestimate the causal importance of this influential, apparently principled display of military independence. Had 'Ammar agreed to assist Ben 'Ali, it is not clear that the ultimate outcome would have been different (though it might have been bloodier). Not only

16. Néjib Ayachi, "Remarks on the Unfolding of The Events, and the Nature of Tunisia's Political Regime," (speech, Maghreb Center "The Breakdown of Autocracy in Tunisia" conference, Washington, DC, February 9, 2011), <http://maghrebcenter.files.wordpress.com/2011/07/maghreb-center-tunisia-conf-transcript.pdf>.

17. Ayachi, "Remarks on the Unfolding of The Events"; ICG, "Popular Uprisings in North Africa and the Middle East," pp. 10–11.

18. Goldstone, "Understanding the Revolutions of 2011," p. 13.

19. ICG, "Popular Uprisings in North Africa and the Middle East," p. 11.

20. Clement M. Henry and Robert Springborg, "A Tunisian Solution for Egypt's Military: Why Egypt's Military Will Not Be Able to Govern," *Foreign Affairs*, February 21, 2011, <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/67475/clement-m-henry-and-robert-springborg/a-tunisian-solution-for-egypts-military>.

was the Tunisian army small — an additional 18,000 men would not necessarily have sufficed to suppress the protestors — it also was undersupplied and poorly equipped.<sup>21</sup> The International Crisis Group (ICG) reports, for example, that only four of the 12 state helicopters in Tunis belonged to the army, while the other eight were flown by the security services.<sup>22</sup>

To survive, the Ben ‘Ali regime would have needed the assistance of civilians. Specifically, the president needed a critical mass of civilians to either not join the demonstrations, thereby limiting their influence, or to mobilize large and convincing counterdemonstrations that could have made anti-Ben ‘Ali protestors think twice about the feasibility of their collective endeavor. Neither occurred, because during the preceding decade and a half, Ben ‘Ali had alienated legions of Tunisians with an investment in the survival of his regime, groups who at the outset of his rule appeared to be his natural allies within society. These groups included women, the business community, and, most important of all, Tunisia’s long-ruling hegemonic political party, the Constitutional Democratic Rally (*al-Tajammu‘ al-Dusturi al-Dimuqrati*, or *Rassemblement Constitutionnel Démocratique*, hereafter RCD). In January 2011, Ben ‘Ali could not rely on these Tunisians either to refrain from demonstrating or hold counterdemonstrations, when either action would have diluted the voices of his opponents. By the late 2000s, it also was clear that Tunisian judges and journalists — once stalwart agents of the regime — were no longer so reliable, and that the US would not unconditionally back President Ben ‘Ali, either.

Tunisian women, particularly those who were urban and educated, could be counted among Ben ‘Ali’s supporters in the early years of his rule. They saw him as a ruler who would uphold President Habib Bourguiba’s commitment to the most progressive family and gender law code in the Arab world and prevent Tunisian Islamists’ more conservative inclinations from influencing law and public policy.<sup>23</sup> Yet women did not become an unconditional support group of Ben ‘Ali, as the emergence of the Tunisian Association of Democratic Women (*al-Jam‘iyya al-Tunisiyya li-l-Ni-sa’ al-Dimuqratiyyat*, or *Association Tunisienne des Femmes Démocrates*, hereafter ATFD) demonstrated. Initially founded as an organization advocating for women’s social rights and the secularization of Tunisian institutions, ATFD evolved into a movement that opposed the Ben ‘Ali regime in the 1990s and 2000s.<sup>24</sup>

Small and midsized businesses, which constituted the vast majority of the private sector, were also considered natural allies of the nascent Ben ‘Ali regime. At the outset of his rule, the new president offered much of value to the business community. Removing President Habib Bourguiba from power temporarily diverted Tunisia from a confrontation between its principal Islamist movement, Ennahda (in full, the Renaissance Movement, *Harakat al-Nahda*), and the state, which had been escalating in alarming ways. Ben ‘Ali’s subsequent repression of Ennahda in the early 1990s was seen as sparing Tunisia from the destabilization of the civil war between Islamists and the state unfolding in neighboring Algeria. In the meantime, Ben ‘Ali appeared to be setting Tunisia on a course for long-term prosperity by negotiating

21. Henry and Springborg, “A Tunisian Solution for Egypt’s Military.”

22. ICG, “Popular Uprisings in North Africa and the Middle East,” pp. 10–11.

23. King, *The New Authoritarianism in the Middle East and North Africa*, p. 181.

24. ICG, “Popular Uprisings in North Africa and the Middle East,” p. 13.

trade agreements with Europe, attracting foreign investment, establishing programs designed to increase the competitiveness of Tunisian firms, and forcing the Tunisian labor federation to accept reforms that drove down the cost of labor.

However, the anticipated benefits of a Ben 'Ali regime proved elusive over time. State programs ostensibly designed to raise domestic firms' global competitiveness did not function well. Regime agents coerced businesses into donating to Ben 'Ali's National Solidarity Fund, which focused on improving infrastructure in poorer, more marginal areas of Tunisia.<sup>25</sup> Well-connected businessmen part of or close to the families of Ben 'Ali and his wife, Leila Trabelsi, preyed on the economy, gaining disproportionately relative to small and medium businesses from the privatization of state-owned enterprises and the distribution of easy credit, etc. This contributed to a regional dynamic wherein the coastal cities of Sousse and Monastir (traditional homes of the ruling families) were favored by regime policy, a fact that drove local businessmen to support demonstrations against Ben 'Ali in the city of Sfax in January 2011.<sup>26</sup> Over time, Tunisia's top business association, the Tunisian Union of Industry, Commerce, and Handicrafts (*al-Ittihad al-Tunisi li-l-Sina'a wa-l-Tijara wa-l-Sina'at Taqlidiyya*, or *Union Tunisienne de l'Industrie du Commerce et de l'Artisanat*, hereafter UTICA), also increasingly failed to represent small and medium firms, which came to view the organization as an instrument of big business and large capital holders with ties to the state.<sup>27</sup>

For 30 years, President Bourguiba had governed in concert with and through the mechanism of Tunisia's hegemonic ruling party, the RCD, whose origins lay in the country's nationalist movement.<sup>28</sup> At the outset of his rule, Ben 'Ali also relied on the party as he consolidated power. However, after co-opting his secular opponents and then crushing his Islamist opposition, Ben 'Ali reconfigured the pillars on which presidential authority rested. Whereas Bourguiba had been a master at cultivating and manipulating party elites who in turn had their own clienteles, Ben 'Ali increasingly staffed his cabinets with technocrats who had no power bases of their own.<sup>29</sup> The RCD remained important to regime functioning: its nationwide apparatus helped the Ben 'Ali regime transmit directives, distribute patronage, resolve local conflicts, and surveil Tunisian society.<sup>30</sup> But under Ben 'Ali, RCD notables were increasingly marginalized from the inner corridors of power.

RCD leaders were resentful about this development. Indicative of party anger at Ben 'Ali was the July 2005 publication on opposition websites of a declaration critical of the regime. Signed "the Democratic Destourians" (*les Destouriens Démocrates*) and claiming to be representative of a silent RCD majority, the declaration criticized Ben 'Ali for implementing a series of measures without popular support and approval that strengthened executive powers and perverted the foundations of the Republic. Exam-

25. King, *The New Authoritarianism in the Middle East and North Africa*, p. 170.

26. ICG, "Popular Uprisings in North Africa and the Middle East," p. 6.

27. Melani Claire Cammett, *Globalization and Business Politics in Arab North Africa: A Comparative Perspective* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 125–26.

28. At independence, the national party was called the New Constitutional Liberal Party, but better known as Néo-Destour; it was renamed the *Parti Socialiste Destourien* (Socialist Destourian Party) in the 1960s, and was again renamed the RCD when Ben 'Ali deposed Bourguiba in 1987.

29. Christopher Alexander, *Tunisia: Stability and Reform in the Modern Maghreb* (London: Routledge, 2010), p. 66.

30. Béatrice Hibou, *The Force of Obedience: The Political Economy of Repression in Tunisia* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2011).

ples of these measures included constitutional amendments in 2002 and the December 2003 Anti-Terrorism Law.<sup>31</sup> According to a leading RCD official, many RCD members were opposed to what they saw as a regime that was no longer in the hands of the party, but rather in those of the families of the president and his wife and the clans that clustered around them. Mohamed Jegham, a former defense minister and ambassador to Italy, commented regarding Ben 'Ali's treatment of the party, "RCD cadres no longer existed. We were treated at best like peons, at worst like lepers."<sup>32</sup>

This distancing of the president from the party had strategic consequences during the revolution. In the course of the upheavals of December 2010 and January 2011, the RCD failed to mobilize a single demonstration in support of Ben 'Ali. Despite the demands from the president's entourage and high RCD officials, the lower ranks of the party were opposed, and no such demonstrations took place. However, RCD members were counted among anti-Ben 'Ali demonstrators, including in Sidi Bouzid. On January 14, members of a pro-Ben 'Ali rally in Tunis organized by RCD Secretary General Mohamed Ghariani defected and joined with a UGTT-organized, anti-Ben 'Ali rally calling for the fall of the regime. According to Ghariani, "No one wanted to defend the president any longer."<sup>33</sup>

In addition to the president's "natural constituencies" of women, businesses, and the RCD, the mid-2000s revealed that two key professional groups, which were once reliable agents of the regime, had become increasingly ambivalent about continuing to serve its interests. In late 2004, the Association of Tunisian Magistrates elected a president considered by the regime to be too independent. Furthermore, the association adopted a motion criticizing the lack of judicial independence in Tunisia and articulating policy recommendations to rectify the situation. The judges' action was a historical first. Since independence, Tunisia's presidents had always relied on the Tunisian bench as a "transmission belt" for government pressure on opposition movements and social groups that sought more political autonomy than presidents could tolerate.<sup>34</sup> In May 2005, dissident members of the Association of Tunisian Journalists published an online report critical of regime management of the media and the degradation of freedom of the press since the start of the 1990s. The Ben 'Ali regime was able to snuff out both tentative expressions of autonomy and bring the two groups back into line, but in hindsight these were important cracks in the regime's support base.

Finally, while the story of Ben 'Ali's narrowing support base is primarily a domestic one, mention deserves to be made of an external dimension. Consistent with its historical inclinations towards its African sphere of influence, France stood by Ben 'Ali in his hour of need — French foreign minister Michèle Alliot-Marie offered French police assistance to Ben 'Ali just two days before his departure.<sup>35</sup> The United States' posture, however, was less friendly to Ben 'Ali. In the 2000s, under President George W. Bush, the US backed away from its traditional support for Middle East autocrats and began to call for democratization

31. The text of the declaration can be found in, Vincent Geisser and Éric Gobe, "*Des Fissures dans la 'Maison Tunisie'? Le Régime de Ben Ali Face aux Mobilisations Protestataires*" ["Cracks in the 'Tunisia House'? The Ben 'Ali Regime against Protest Rallies"], *L'Année du Maghreb*, Vol. 2 (2005/6), pp. 353–414, available at <http://anneemaghreb.revues.org/140>.

32. ICG, "Popular Uprisings in North Africa and the Middle East," pp. 9–10.

33. ICG, "Popular Uprisings in North Africa and the Middle East," p. 10.

34. Geisser and Gobe, "Cracks in the 'Tunisia House?'"

35. Schraeder and Redissi, "Ben Ali's Fall," p. 14.



in the region. This democracy agenda reached its height between 2003 and 2005.<sup>36</sup> During the final years of the Bush Administration, policy did not match pro-democratic rhetoric, but then President Obama's June 2009 Cairo speech reinvigorated US pro-democracy rhetoric as he pronounced that certain basic freedoms were universal and that the United States would support these everywhere. In the eyes of one observer, "[h]is proclamation did not produce this year's democratic upheavals in the Arab world, but it set expectations for how the United States would respond to them."<sup>37</sup>

Other US actions and pronouncements were likely more influential in the course of Tunisian events. In early 2006, a US embassy official attended a press conference of the October 18 Movement, which in 2005 saw numerous independent opposition groups come together against the Ben 'Ali regime. US ambassador William Hudson's cable later said of the movement, "its goals remain valid and closely aligned with our own."<sup>38</sup> In 2007, US ambassador Robert Godec, Hudson's successor, visited leaders of the most substantial legal political party opposing Ben 'Ali, the Progressive Democratic Party (*al-Hizb al-Dimuqrati al-Taqaddumi* or *Parti Démocrate Progressiste*, hereafter PDP), as they carried out a hunger strike to protest the regime's shuttering of their headquarters. WikiLeaks revealed in November 2010 cables written by Godec (2007–2009) detailing the corruption of Ben 'Ali which demonstrated US distaste for the regime (though the cables did not recommend cutting ties). According to Schraeder and Redissi, in the throes of the uprising, US ambassador Gordon Gray (2009–2012) told Ben 'Ali that he had to step down and "could not count on exile in the U.S."<sup>39</sup>

By 2010, the foundations of the Ben 'Ali regime had eroded considerably, the product of the fact that the president had alienated multiple key civilian constituencies. The consequences of decisions Ben 'Ali made over time ultimately rendered his regime brittle and vulnerable to mass, sustained civic protest. With precious few civilian actors interested in standing with Ben 'Ali, or at least not against him, the possibility existed that demonstrators from multiple demographics might sustain mass nationwide protests capable of overwhelming and outnumbering the regime's coercive forces.

### *THE EMERGENCE OF SUSTAINED, CROSS-CLASS, GEOGRAPHICALLY WIDESPREAD MASS PROTEST*

The stability of regimes, particularly authoritarian regimes, is threatened when multiple sections of society protest simultaneously across large swaths of territory.<sup>40</sup> This requirement presents a collective action problem amplified in authoritarian contexts by citizens' fear of regime retribution for public dissent. How, then, can we un-

36. Jason Brownlee and Joshua Stacher, "Change of Leader, Continuity of System: Nascent Liberalization in Post-Mubarak Egypt," *Comparative Democratization Newsletter*, Vol. 9, No. 2 (May 2011), p. 8.

37. Anderson, "Demystifying the Arab Spring," p. 7.

38. William Hudson, "Movement of 18 October Complains of GOT Abuse, Defends Islamist Component," US Embassy Tunis cable #06TUNIS224\_a, February 3, 2006, available at *WikiLeaks: Public Library of US Diplomacy*, [http://www.wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/06TUNIS224\\_a.html](http://www.wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/06TUNIS224_a.html).

39. Schraeder and Redissi, "Ben Ali's Fall," p. 14.

40. Mona El-Ghobashy, "The Praxis of the Egyptian Revolution," *Middle East Report*, No. 258 (Spring 2011), pp. 2–13.

derstand the willingness and ability of Tunisians from across myriad social sectors to mount massive, sustained protests at the non-negligible risk of physical retaliation by the security apparatus? Social media are part of the answer, but are insufficient because such media cannot create actors' basic political preferences and instincts. Three developments in the 2000s were key facilitators of the mobilization. First, secular opposition leaders came to see Ben 'Ali as a larger threat to their interests than that posed by Tunisia's Islamists. Second and relatedly, secular-Islamist rapprochement and cooperation broke down barriers of distrust and unified the opposition in an unprecedented fashion. Third, the agency of the UGTT — and its political evolution in the wake of the Gafsa uprising of 2008 (described later in this article) — was pivotal to the commencement and territorial elaboration of the protests.

In the 1980s and 1990s, radical Islamist groups were pivotal actors on domestic soil across the Maghrib. They sought political power with visions of establishing shari'a-based regimes and resorted to violence (some more than others) to advance their goals. Tunisia experienced violent confrontations between leftist militants and Islamists on university campuses in the 1980s. While Ennahda, Tunisia's main Islamist movement, did not utilize violence to the extent that Egypt's al-Gama'a al-Islamiyya did, violence was not absent from its repertoire. For example, the party was implicated in attacks wherein acid was thrown in individuals' faces.<sup>41</sup> In 1991, Ennahda militants attacked an RCD branch in a Tunis neighborhood, an incident that led to the death of a party security guard who was burned to death.<sup>42</sup> President Ben 'Ali repressed Ennahda in the 1990s and used the Islamist threat to justify his closure of the Tunisian political arena.

For a time, Ben 'Ali enjoyed widespread support for this stance. The Tunisian middle class was wary of Ennahda's extremism and willingness to resort to violence.<sup>43</sup> Many women worried that their legal status would come under threat if Ennahda came to power. Members of Tunisia's secular opposition were "grudgingly complicit" with the Ben 'Ali regime for the same reasons.<sup>44</sup> The horrors of the civil war between the state and its Islamist opponents next door in Algeria provided the key context for these political dispositions.

By the late 2000s, however, the radical Islamist threat had arguably receded in important respects, both for Tunisia and for the region as a whole. In terms of the latter, Islamist movements had failed to dislodge secular authoritarian regimes and had either renounced violence altogether or joined with al-Qa'ida to target the US instead.<sup>45</sup> Due to the outcomes of Islamist takeovers in Iran, Sudan, and the Palestinian Authority, many came to perceive the radical Islamist model as a failure in terms of bringing either prosperity or establishing accountability.<sup>46</sup> Mainstream Islamist groups themselves — Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood and its offshoots chief among them — removed explicitly Islamist content from their platforms and became more

41. Rajaa Basly, "The Future of al-Nahda in Tunisia," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace: Sada, Middle East Analysis*, April 20, 2011, <http://carnegieendowment.org/2011/04/20/future-of-al-nahda-in-tunisia/6bqw>.

42. ICG, "Popular Uprisings in North Africa and the Middle East," p. 28.

43. Basly, "The Future of al-Nahda in Tunisia."

44. Alexander, *Tunisia*, p. 66.

45. Fawaz Gerges, *The Far Enemy: Why Jihad Went Global* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

46. Goldstone, "Understanding the Revolutions of 2011," p. 14.

ideologically flexible, backing away from calls to institute shari‘a and focusing their demands instead on “democratic reform, publicly committing themselves to alternation of power, popular sovereignty, and judicial independence.”<sup>47</sup>

By the 2000s, Ennahda had long been dismantled on Tunisian soil, its cadres either in prison or exile. Moreover, there were signs that Ennahda was moderating ideologically. In 1994, the party founded the Nationalist-Islamic Conference (*al-Mu‘tamar al-Qawmi–al-Islami*, or *Conférence Nationaliste et Islamique*), which met every four years in Beirut and was designed to facilitate dialogue between Islamist and secular currents (typically Arab nationalist and leftist parties) in the Arab world. Meanwhile, Ennahda members in exile in Europe worked to open the party up to other political sensibilities.<sup>48</sup> Ennahda member Habib Ellouz explained in 2011 that the party had learned from the Algerian, Sudanese, and its own experiences that going too far with the objective of taking power was a fundamental mistake made by Islamist movements. Ellouz indicated that Islamist movements needed instead to signal to the international community that they advocate democracy as a definitive choice.<sup>49</sup> Ennahda Secretary General Hamadi Jebali stated, “we have in mind the precedent of Hamas, and the fear of dictatorship of the majority. We understand that being alone could prove to be dangerous. We do not want to again be in a polarized situation. For that, we are ready to make concessions.”<sup>50</sup>

Opposition to one-party rule in Tunisia has deep roots, but has long been beset by divisions and mutual antagonisms across the secular-Islamist divide, of which authorities have taken advantage.<sup>51</sup> At the outset of his rule, Ben ‘Ali successfully divided his opposition, using the threat of Tunisian Islamism to co-opt secular opponents to his side. But this strategy broke down in the second half of the 2000s, which saw evidence of increasing confidence-building across the Tunisian opposition landscape among both elites and regular citizens. As will be shown below, Ennahda’s apparent moderation was a key factor that facilitated opposition unification. A second contributing factor, however, was the intensification of Ben ‘Ali’s authoritarian measures.

When Ben ‘Ali first rose to power, his regime “pursued a strategy of exploiting the contradictions within the various political movements, uniting with some in order to attack others on the premise that the repression was only temporary. This encouraged the idea that a party or movement might ‘survive’ if it distanced itself from the Islamists.”<sup>52</sup> Despite this, as the 2000s wore on, it became increasingly evident that Ben ‘Ali’s intentions were only to tighten his control over the reins of power, even in the face of a diminished Islamist threat. A 2002 constitutional amendment made the Tunisian parliament bicameral, creating an upper chamber that Ben ‘Ali packed with RCD members and palace courtesans. In late 2003, antiterrorism legislation was promulgated, leading to increased repression of would-be autonomous organizations and restrictions on their

47. Shadi Hamid, “The Rise of the Islamists: How Islamists Will Change Politics, and Vice Versa,” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 90, No. 3 (May/June 2011), pp. 40–47.

48. ICG, “Popular Uprisings in North Africa and the Middle East,” p. 26–27.

49. ICG, “Popular Uprisings in North Africa and the Middle East,” p. 27.

50. Quoted in ICG, “Popular Uprisings in North Africa and the Middle East,” p. 27.

51. Lutfi Hajji, “The 18 October Coalition for Rights and Freedoms in Tunisia,” *Arab Reform Initiative: Arab Reform Brief*, October 13, 2006, [http://www.arab-reform.net/sites/default/files/ARB\\_Tunisia\\_L.Hadji\\_ENG.pdf](http://www.arab-reform.net/sites/default/files/ARB_Tunisia_L.Hadji_ENG.pdf); Geisser and Gobe, “Cracks in the ‘Tunisia House?’”

52. Hajji, “The 18 October Coalition for Rights and Freedoms in Tunisia,” p. 5.

sources of funding. Ben 'Ali "won" 94.5% of the 2004 presidential election vote, following a 2003 constitutional amendment that ostensibly permitted other candidates to run, but was written so narrowly as to rule out any truly independent competitors. In the 2005 municipal elections, the regime invalidated all ten joint candidate lists presented by independent opposition parties that came together in the Democratic Alliance for Citizenship.<sup>53</sup> The regime prevented the Tunisian Human Rights League (*al-Rabita al-Tunisiyya li-l-Difa' 'an Huquq al-Insan*, or *Ligue Tunisienne des Droits de l'Homme*, hereafter LTDH) from holding its sixth congress in 2005 and replaced members of the board of the Association of Tunisian Judges who were seen as too independent. Thus, as human rights activist Lutfi Hajji writes, by the mid-2000s the opposition concluded that "all methods of recognized political action had been prohibited," "socio-economic growth had not been accompanied by basic minimal political reform," and "the authorities' repression, rather than the Islamists, was the real danger."<sup>54</sup>

Apparent Islamist moderation combined with the relentless intensification of Ben 'Ali's dictatorship resulted in increased dialogue, bridge-building, and collaboration among the ranks of Tunisian opposition forces. In 2001, Moncef Marzouki founded the Congress for the Republic (*al-Mu'tamar min ajl al-Jumhuriyya* or *Congrès pour la République*, hereafter CPR), which since its establishment has been open to dialogue with Islamists. Indeed, it included in its ranks former Islamist student leaders who had been active in the 1990s. The CPR called for the holding of a national democratic conference and the creation of a united opposition front to demand a total break with the Ben 'Ali regime. In the summer of 2004, two meetings took place between Ennahda's Rachid Ghannouchi and the PDP's Néjib Chebbi regarding rapprochement; another took place in late 2005. In an interview with the newsmagazine *Jeune Afrique*, Chebbi explained that in the early 1980s he had moderated his early Marxist positions, and that by 2003 he was convinced that Ennahda's ideology was evolving in a democratic direction. At this point, he became willing to consider rapprochement with the Islamist party.<sup>55</sup>

In the November 2004 elections, while one anti-Islamist opposition coalition<sup>56</sup> fielded candidates for both parliament and the presidency, thus tacitly legitimating the Ben 'Ali regime by playing the game by its rules, another coalition boycotted the process altogether. Hama Hammami's traditionally strongly anti-Islamist Tunisian Workers' Communist Party (*Hizb al-'Ummal al-Shuyu'i al-Tunisi* or *Parti Communiste des Ouvriers de Tunisie*, hereafter PCOT) and Ennahda worked together to boycott the elections, and were joined by the PDP and Mustapha Ben Jaafar's Democratic Forum for Labor and Liberties (*al-Takattul al-Dimuqrati min ajl al-'Amal wa-l-Hurriyyat* or Forum Démocratique pour le Travail et les Libertés, often referred to as Ettakatol).

53. Known as *al-Tahaluf al-Dimuqrati min ajl al-Muwatina* or *Alliance Démocratique pour la Citoyenneté*, the Democratic Alliance brought together four of Tunisia's most independent opposition parties to submit joint candidate lists for approximately ten of the 264 communes in the 2005 elections. This unified opposition effort was a first in Tunisian political history, and a step that Ben 'Ali clearly was unwilling to countenance. See, Geisser and Gobe, "Cracks in the 'Tunisia House?'"

54. Hajji, "The 18 October Coalition for Rights and Freedoms in Tunisia," p. 4.

55. Samy Ghorbal, "*Les Combats de Néjib Chebbi*" ["Néjib Chebbi's Fights"], *Jeune Afrique*, October 15, 2007, <http://www.jeuneafrique.com/Article/LIN14107lescoibbehc0/>.

56. This was Mohamed Ali Halouani's Democratic Initiative (*al-Mubadara al-Dimuqratiyya* or *Initiative Démocratique*), encompassing the Ettajdid Movement (*Harakat al-Tajdid*, Renewal Movement) and progressive independent opposition personalities.

In the meantime, political distances narrowed and familiarity increased as members of the repressed Ennahda who still resided in Tunisia joined other civic and political organizations. Former Ennahda central committee member Hamza Hamza, for example, joined the PDP in 2004, as did another Islamist, Muhammad Hamruni. In addition, Ennahda and other Islamists integrated into Tunisia's independent human rights organizations, LTDH and the National Congress for Liberties in Tunisia (*al-Majlis al-Watani li-l-Hurriyyat bi-Tunis* or *Conseil National pour les Libertés en Tunisie*), as well as the National Bar Association in Tunisia (*al-Hay'a al-Wataniyya li-l-Muhamin bi-Tunis* or *Ordre National des Avocats de Tunisie*).

In 2005, the October 18 Movement deepened Islamist-secularist cooperation. This movement arose in response to the holding in Tunisia of the World Summit on the Information Society in November 2005, a UN-sponsored conference on Internet governance and the dynamics and inequities inherent in the digital information revolution. To highlight the hypocrisy of holding such an event in a country where the authorities routinely censored the Internet and quashed freedom of expression, eight prominent political dissidents began a hunger strike.<sup>57</sup> Several of the eight were known Islamists (though none were specifically tied to Ennahda); the others hailed from secular opposition parties and human rights organizations. After the hunger strike, leaders of Ennahda and members of the secular opposition, including the PDP and others, established an October 18 committee in December 2005.<sup>58</sup> The committee formulated and published a common platform consisting of three basic demands: freedom of organization for all political parties; freedom of information and expression; and the release of and amnesty for political prisoners.<sup>59</sup> Hajji (himself one of the eight hunger strikers) emphasized that the October 18 Movement and committee represented a new dynamic in Tunisian opposition politics. This movement pursued a unifying rather than exclusionary approach that focused on common political interests shared by opposition groups. The approach established a setting in which mutual respect and a mutually acknowledged right to disagree served as a basis for coexistence.<sup>60</sup>

Talks between opposition secularists and Islamists, including representatives of Ennahda, continued into 2006. The intent was to address additional issues of common concern including women's freedom, freedom of conscience, and the relationship between religion and the state.<sup>61</sup> The eventual objective was to create a democratic charter enshrining fundamental, agreed upon rules and principles that no party would violate upon taking power in a future, democratic context.<sup>62</sup> These talks played a fundamental role in reducing distrust between ideological poles in the opposition.<sup>63</sup> US ambassador Hudson reported in a February 2006 cable that the Ben 'Ali regime was alarmed that the October 18 Movement was bringing together once disparate

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57. Geisser and Gobe, "Cracks in the 'Tunisia House?'"

58. Ghorbal, "Néjib Chebbi's Fights."

59. ICG, "Popular Uprisings in North Africa and the Middle East," p. 1.

60. Hajji, "The 18 October Coalition for Rights and Freedoms in Tunisia," p. 5.

61. Ghorbal, "Néjib Chebbi's Fights."

62. Hajji, "The 18 October Coalition for Rights and Freedoms in Tunisia," p. 7.

63. ICG, "Popular Uprisings in North Africa and the Middle East," p. 27.

parties, including Islamists, around a common cause.<sup>64</sup> It banned the movement and labeled its leaders fugitives, harassing them to prevent the continuation of dialogue.

Evidence suggests that depolarization was also occurring among Tunisian non-elites in the 2000s. That decade saw substantial growth in the number of Tunisian-origin websites featuring political content. An ICG report quoted Tunisian cyber-activists saying that while at first they were divided ideologically, the experience of censorship unified them very quickly. Over time, activists came to share a very generally democratic orientation and advocated a shared common aspiration for basic political liberties online as well as off-line, rather than any specific political agenda.<sup>65</sup>

These acts of rapprochement among the opposition in the 2000s were important to the unfolding of Tunisians' mass mobilizations in December 2010 and January 2011. It is hard to imagine masses of citizens responding to the calls to demonstrate against the Ben 'Ali regime had there existed widespread concern among the elite and broader society over the possibility that a subsequent political vacuum might lead to extremist Islamist rule or civil war. Instead, unprecedented solidarity in the ranks of the opposition — at both elite and nonelite levels — led to increased confidence that such outcomes would not come to pass.

Although reduced concerns about Islamists and secular-Islamist bridge-building were crucial contextual factors that facilitated mobilization in 2011, they do not provide an adequate account of the human agency that was required to get the mobilization underway. Here, the role of the UGTT was paramount.<sup>66</sup> Tunisia's labor federation is an important institution that historically held significant political autonomy from the ruling single party. It boasts deep, authentic roots in Tunisia's pre-independence nationalist movement; and while Habib Bourguiba managed to subordinate it after independence, the UGTT has confronted the regime at crucial moments in Tunisian political history. Globalization and neoliberal economic policies weakened the UGTT, as they have unions elsewhere, and Ben 'Ali's regime seemed to compromise the UGTT's independence. Still, the labor federation witnessed tensions between its senior leadership and certain member unions that advocated for both a more confrontational approach to the regime and closer ties with opposition organizations. The latter camp included unions representing engineers, doctors, university professors, teachers, healthcare workers, and postal workers. Unions in Tunis, in industrial centers like Sfax, and in mining areas in the south also were especially militant.<sup>67</sup> These unions' membership included leftist and Arab nationalist activists who had long been banned from participating independently in the political arena.<sup>68</sup>

Without the initial agency of these union actors, Muhammad Bouazizi's self-immolation very well may not have sparked mobilization. In Sidi Bouzid, teachers from the national secondary education syndicate took Bouazizi to the hospital after his self-immolation on December 17. The same day, union members accompanied Bouazizi's

64. Hudson, "Movement of 18 October Complains of GOT Abuse." It should be noted that not all secularist forces supported this dialogue. Ettajdid did not, and the ATFD also was opposed.

65. ICG, "Popular Uprisings in North Africa and the Middle East," p. 7.

66. Anderson, "Demystifying the Arab Spring," p. 4.

67. Chris Toensing, "Tunisian Labor Leaders Reflect Upon Revolt," *Middle East Report*, No. 258 (Spring 2011), p. 32.

68. ICG, "Popular Uprisings in North Africa and the Middle East," p. 2.

family to the local prefectural office to express their anger at how the regime had treated him. Local members from UGTT education, health, and postal unions were active in framing what happened to Bouazizi not as a suicide resulting from the socioeconomic misfortune of an individual, but rather as a political assassination: they cast Bouazizi as a victim of a regime that had neglected its own. These were the actions that touched off a week of protests and civil disorder in Sidi Bouzid, which then spread across the nation. After Bouazizi's death on January 4, 2011, union members formed a "committee of the marginalized" and activated their contacts throughout central Tunisia to provoke further demonstrations.<sup>69</sup>

If local union actors began the mobilization in the interior, the disposition of the UGTT leadership was pivotal to its geographic expansion. After initial hesitation, the UGTT responded to pressure from its militant member unions and played a leadership role in the mobilization. On January 5, the national syndicate of secondary school teachers called for a twenty-minute stop of work in the schools in support of the ongoing protest movement. On January 11, the UGTT's National Administrative Commission publicly recognized the right of all of its members to demonstrate. On January 12, the labor unions' mobilization was central to a 30,000-person demonstration in Sfax — the largest prior to Ben 'Ali's fall. Two days later, a UGTT-launched strike was a major driving factor in Ben 'Ali's departure. The UGTT thus played a pivotal role in the geographical extension of the protest from Sidi Bouzid outward, and in its progressive convergence toward Tunis.

The UGTT's disposition looms as especially consequential when contrasted with its stance three years earlier, during the January–June 2008 revolt in the Gafsa mining region. This revolt began when a state-owned phosphate company announced a slate of new hires consisting primarily of individuals with connections to the regime, rather than locals and the children of workers who had been harmed in the line of work. The firm had promised the national labor federation that its hires would be local, as Gafsa was a region of deep socioeconomic distress and unemployment. This action mobilized many sections of society: unemployed graduates, women, university students, the Tunisian diaspora, and Internet activists.<sup>70</sup> While concerning to the regime in this respect — and also because the regime had to call in the army to quell it — the movement remained regionally contained and was "essentially about advocating the rights of mine workers of the Gafsa area. It did not translate into a wider mobilization demanding the comprehensive rights of the Tunisian people."<sup>71</sup>

During that period, a number of local unions in Redeyef supported the demonstrators against the regime while most other local base unions, the regional UGTT leadership in Gafsa, and the national UGTT leadership sided with the regime.<sup>72</sup> Yet in 2011, a member of the UGTT executive bureau at Sfax noted that, when the 2010 demonstra-

69. This paragraph as well as the one proceeding it draw on facts presented by the International Crisis Group in ICG, "Popular Uprisings in North Africa and the Middle East," pp. 3–6.

70. Laryssa Chomiak and John P. Entelis, "The Making of North Africa's Intifadas," *Middle East Report*, No. 259 (Summer 2011), pp. 13–15.

71. Nadia Marzouki, "From People to Citizens in Tunisia," *Middle East Report*, No. 259 (Summer 2011), p. 17.

72. Larbi Chouikha and Éric Gobe, "La Tunisie entre la 'Révolte du Bassin Minier de Gafsa' et l'Échéance Électorale de 2009" ["Tunisia between the 'Gafsa Mining Region Revolt' and Election Day 2009"], *L'Année du Maghreb*, Vol. 5 (2009), p. 12.

tions began, the union “did not want to repeat the error of Gafsa,” as the union’s stance had brought much criticism from workers and some local and regional branches.<sup>73</sup> In 2008, disturbances rooted in socioeconomic despair, as well as anger at political favoritism and corruption did not spread geographically beyond the mining region. In 2010, they did. In 2008, as in 2010, demonstrators gained the support of university students, members of the Tunisian diaspora in France, social media entrepreneurs, and certain independent domestic actors (such as members of the PCOT, Ettakatol, and LTDH).<sup>74</sup> A primary difference in the 2010/11 revolution was a different regional and national UGTT response to protests. A qualitatively different, more systemic level of support from the regional and national UGTT institutions facilitated the spread of the demonstrations. The nationwide geographical extension of dissent was strategically crucial to the revolution, as it prevented the regime’s coercive forces from containing the protests in a small area. Instead, the regime’s security forces were obliged to react to multiple widespread disturbances which surpassed their ability to repress the movement.

The geographic elaboration of the demonstrations cannot be attributed solely to the agency of UGTT actors. Social networking media and satellite television channels helped broaden the composition of the movement from “just” a labor movement to include young members of the middle class and the elite, bringing citizens out in such numbers as to raise internal doubts within the regime as to its ability to counter the mobilization. The National Bar Association also played a key role: on December 31, it organized a series of demonstrations in six locations across Tunisia, and on January 6, lawyers went on strike. Still, local UGTT actors initiated the protests’ spread, and the disposition of the upper administrative echelons of the confederation — so different from their stance in 2008 — was critical in the facilitation of mass sustained protests across Tunisia.

## CONCLUSION AND POSTREVOLUTION DYNAMICS

Socioeconomic grievances, the utilization of social media, and the political disposition of the Tunisian armed forces were important to the success of mass civic protest in felling the regime of President Zine El-‘Abidine Ben ‘Ali in late 2010 and early 2011. However, a more detailed look at the decade preceding this eruption reveals that other developments were also crucial. The apparent moderation of Islamist actors incentivized secular opposition leaders to alter longstanding habits of noncooperation with Islamists. At the same time, the bald intensification of Ben ‘Ali’s grip on power belied the idea that the president would ever voluntarily open up the political system. As a result, the 2000s saw important trends in secular-Islamist cooperation. Similar patterns of political depolarization among Ben ‘Ali’s opponents developed throughout Tunisian society as well and facilitated mass political mobilization.

The UGTT’s actions, first at the local, and then at the regional and national levels, were pivotal to sparking and then geographically spreading this mobilization to the point that the regime was unable to contain it. Had sufficient numbers of civilians sided with the Ben ‘Ali regime — either by staying home from opposition demonstrations or by staging substantial loyalist counterdemonstrations — his regime might have survived.

73. ICG, “Popular Uprisings in North Africa and the Middle East,” p. 6.

74. Chomiak and Entelis, “The Making of North Africa’s Intifadas,” pp. 13–15.



But the narrowing of the regime's support base during the 2000s, when Ben 'Ali alienated key elements of his own civilian constituency — women, the business community, the ruling party, judges, and journalists — meant that mass mobilization proceeded uncountered, to an extent at which an isolated president could not withstand it.

This fuller account of the revolution's mobilization is important because the secularist-Islamist rapprochement that took place in the 2000s appears to have been crucial to both the felling of the Ben 'Ali regime in January 2011 and the ability of Tunisian civilians to navigate successfully the transition period from then to the Constituent Assembly elections in October 2011. After Ben 'Ali's departure for Saudi Arabia, when it appeared that RCD members were trying to reassert one party rule, secularists and Islamists participated in the Casbah demonstrations of January to March 2011,<sup>75</sup> which succeeded in ensuring the dissolution of the RCD and other despised institutions of Ben 'Ali's rule; the legalization of Ennahda; and that elections for the Constituent Assembly would be held. Secularists and Islamists also worked shoulder to shoulder to create the Higher Authority for the Realization of Revolutionary Objectives, Political Reform, and Democratic Transition, which acted as a de facto legislature during the transitional period. Secularists and Islamists did not always agree within the context of this body, and the question of when to hold Constituent Assembly elections (July or October 2011) caused serious political contention. Ennahda left the group in late June, but it did not obstruct the transition, and the Higher Authority functioned through the successful holding of elections in October.

From that point forward, drafting a new constitution would depend on the ability of Ennahda (the plurality winner in those elections) to work with secular parties, and compromise in order to find common cause. In December 2011, Ennahda established a governing coalition in the Constituent Assembly with the CPR, whose leader, Moncef Marzouki, became president, and with Ettakatol, whose leader, Mustapha Ben Jaafar, became head of the assembly. Ennahda's Hamadi Jebali became prime minister. Though a constitution was meant to be produced within one calendar year, only by summer 2013 was the task nearing completion. Despite depolarization of the opposition's political spectrum in the 2000s, secularist and Islamist assembly members unsurprisingly held deeply divergent views on many key constitutional matters, including shari'a law, women's rights, the criminalization of blasphemy, and, most divisive, whether Tunisia should have a parliamentary or (semi-)presidential system. Draft language regarding gender generated substantial controversy. These divides slowed but did not stop the work of the assembly.

Ennahda made concessions on several of these issues. In March 2012, the party announced it would not insist that the constitution name shari'a as either *a* or *the* source for legislation. By October 2012, it appeared Ennahda would not insist the constitution designate the harming of sacred values as an offense. And by May 2013, a compromise had been reached wherein neither the president nor the prime minister would exercise sole control over the executive branch. This too represented an Ennahda concession, as the party had long advocated that Tunisia adopt a parliamentary system.

Dynamics within the assembly and the general tenor of secularist-Ennahda re-

75. The Casbah demonstrations saw activists gather in the square outside of the prime minister's office, demanding the resignation of the prime minister and his cabinet, which included many holdovers from the Ben 'Ali era, as well as the dismantling of Ben 'Ali's secret police and political party. See, Steve Coll, "The Casbah Coalition," *New Yorker*, April 4, 2011, pp. 34–40.

lations since the election have been complicated by the emergence of the Salafis as a political force. If Ennahda did moderate and if secularists and Islamists had built important bridges, both developments were threatened by the appearance of more strident, conservative Islamist actors to the right of Ennahda on the political spectrum. Salafis carried out multiple violent attacks on artists, journalists, liquor stores, etc., and secularists repeatedly charged the Ennahda-led interior ministry with being excessively tolerant of Salafi provocations. The assassination of prominent human rights activist Chokri Belaïd in February 2013 represented the first serious crisis in secularist-Ennahda relations, and indeed could have been a moment of real peril for the fragile Tunisian transition. In its wake, however, secularists and Islamists in the tripartite coalition forged a path that avoided crisis. A cabinet reshuffle ensued in early March in which Ennahda ceded control of the interior, defense, and foreign ministries to independent technocrats — a concession secularists had been demanding for some time. Moreover, while Ennahda took a tolerant approach toward Salafi actors during the first part of 2012, arguing that repression risked their radicalization, after violent demonstrations outside the US Embassy in September 2012 Ennahda officials have taken a harder line against Salafis, including banning one group from holding its congress.<sup>76</sup>

The July 2013 assassination of Mohamed Brahmi, a leftist MP and opponent of Ennahda, threatened to unravel Tunisia's coalition government and indeed the constitution-writing process itself. Protests raged in the week after the killing (and continue through the time of this writing), demanding the resignation of the Ennahda-led government and the dissolution of the Constituent Assembly. In early August, Mustapha Ben Jaafar suspended the assembly's work, and it seemed that the Tunisian transition might collapse just as a new constitution neared completion and concrete plans for new elections were being laid. Yet in the following weeks, Ennahda's Rachid Ghannouchi engaged in dialogue with numerous opposition leaders, working to reach a compromise that might help Tunisia exit this latest crisis. And in mid-September, the Constituent Assembly was scheduled to resume its work.

Islamist moderation and secularist-Islamist rapprochement in the 2000s did not mean that in a new Tunisia, consensus and harmony would reign supreme. Secularists and Ennahda have been at loggerheads often, over multiple profound matters. Yet Ennahda has repeatedly shown a willingness to give ground, and it remains in dialogue with its secularist rivals. Comparing developments in Tunisia to those in Egypt suggest that the secularist-Islamist rapprochement that occurred prior to Ben 'Ali's fall helps account for the fact that Tunisia's transition remains intact and in progress despite serious turbulence. Egyptian president Husni Mubarak approached his opposition in a different fashion than did Ben 'Ali, allowing the Muslim Brotherhood and others to compete for parliamentary seats. Mubarak's secularist and Islamist opponents both sat in parliament — the latter sometimes in significant numbers — and thus never faced the exclusivist approach of Ben 'Ali, which this article argues drove his secularist and Islamist opponents into serious dialogue and cooperation in the 2000s. When it came to writing a new constitution in post-Mubarak Egypt, secularist-Islamist tensions led to

76. In May 2013 the Tunisian government banned Ansar al-Shari'a, one of the country's most extreme Salafi groups, from meeting in the historic city of Kairouan. Siobhán Silke, "Tunisia Bans Salafist Group from Holding Conference," *France 24*, May 18, 2013, <http://www.france24.com/en/20130517-tunisia-bans-salafists-ansar-al-sharia-conference>.

a breakdown wherein liberal, secular, and Christian members boycotted the assembly and Islamists pushed through a constitution in their absence. In summer 2013, secularists cheered as the Egyptian military ousted the administration of Mohamed Morsi and the Muslim Brotherhood. In Tunisia, to be sure, there continues to be discord, disagreement, and periodic crises. The fact that Tunisia's secularists and Islamists formed working relationships with one another around a common cause in the 2000s does not guarantee that they will successfully inaugurate and operate democratic institutions in the coming years. Yet to date, there has been no breakdown, a considerable achievement given the novelty of secularists and Islamists attempting together to fashion a new set of rules for politics in the wake of withering repression.